Waves of Change – The 1990s, 2000s, 2010s

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The 20th century presented many challenges and innovations. These innovations can be analyzed from 6 different perspectives: waves of change (Toffler, 1980), religion, technology, society, work, and education. These perspectives are interconnected and present a fabric of human experience. The decades of the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s provide a look at the culmination of the 20th century and a method for predicting the remainder of the 21st century.

The turn of the 21st century marked the peak of the information age and the beginning of the contextual age. The privatization of the Internet and the advancement of the World Wide Web (World Wide Web Foundation, 2013) and Data Warehousing in 1994 allowed individuals across the globe to communicate and trade data in real time (Lewis, 1994). This allowed for movements to grow faster and for communities to grow with little regard to national boundaries.

Religious and social structures began to change with the improvements in information sharing. In the decades leading up to the 1990s the Chinese government’s oppression of the Buddhist religious sect Falun Gong in 1992 (CNN, 2002) may not have been made known, nor would it have been allowed to spread to Chinese communities outside of China. Likewise, the ability to share information and form a political voice from various parts of the country contributed to the United Methodist Church adjusting its view of homosexuality in 1996 (Butt, 1996).

The world of work also began to shift in the 1990s. The practice of offshoring and outsourcing of low skilled and specialized labor that had begun in the 1980s (Handfield, 2006) began to accelerate causing job displacement in the manufacturing sectors. An expansion of the American Disabilities Act (United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2008) prohibits job applicants from being denied employment based on disabilities and the importance of family and the rights of workers versus those of employers in work-life balance begins to emerge with the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 (United States Dept. of Labor, 1993) allowing employees to take up to 12 weeks of leave for some surgeries and conditions. FMLA and the focus on the employee fit well with Peter Senge’s (Smith, 2001) concept of the learning organization in which employees are empowered to maintain work-life balance and continue learning as the organization grows through that learning.

The decade of the 2000s brought social upheaval with the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, social media, and the beginning of the Contextual Age. The 2000s also brought social upheaval in the form of the Great Recession of 2008. Between October 2008 and April 2009 almost 700,000 American Employees lost their jobs each month (Looney & Greenstone, 2011). Radical Islam and Radical Christianity began to dominate religious discussions in the media (Elver, 2013). The advances of data warehousing in the 1990s allowed the first “social media” company Friendster to begin contextualizing online presence around the user while allowing them to connect to others (Dworjan, 2013).

The ability to rally people through social media begins to drive changes in thought regarding the roles of women in religion, same sex marriage, and homosexuals as clergy in mainline churches. In 2006 the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs provided fifty women with diplomas certifying them as Imam (Delong-bas, 2013). The same year the Episcopalian church allowed an openly gay man into the clergy (Butt, 2010).

George Siemens (2004) advanced his emerging learning theory called connectivism in 2004. This theory promotes the idea of contextualized learning in a world where most data is captured and transmitted digitally. Contextualization through the use of knowledge “nodes” and strength of networks differs from other learning theories in that it stresses that learning is less about retention of static knowledge and the development of networks to improve the querying for knowledge. Blogs, social media, and access to experts via email provide the majority links to the nodes.

The current decade, the 2010s, have been marked by miniaturization and mobility of computing devices. Cell phones, computers, and portable digital assistants (PDAs) have all merged into smart phones, tablet computers and other mobile devices. In work and school the trend for miniaturization and mobility has coined the phrase Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)(Nielsen, 2012). As people merge their personal tools with work tools, there has been concern for privacy of employers, employees, and students (Privacy Rights Clearning House, 2011).

Education technology, in reaction to the technological drive towards contextualization, has responded with expanded use of connectivism and emergent learning theories (Mackness, 2012). Emergent learning theory posits that learning, particularly for experts, happens most effectively within cross-disciplinary problem solving. Learning emerges from people with different expertise providing insights from multiple perspectives on a particular problem set. Instructional design methodologies stemming from these methodologies include creating problems that require multiple disciplines to develop new methods that may not have been previously apparent (Karousou & Mackness, 2011).

The drive for individual contextualization is indicated in the social and religious spheres as well. The 2012 Gallup survey (Newport, 2012) showed that 32% of the population now consider themselves non-religious or not identifying with a religion. Another interesting trend is the growth in attendance for evangelical Megachurches, particularly for those members aged 25 to 35(Bird & Thumma, 2011). A drawing point for these churches is that they feel less “churchy” with some denominations espousing more humanist beliefs than dogma. However, evangelical conservatives have also shown an increase in attendance, and mainline liberal churches have shown a decrease in attendance. The trend in contextualization mixed with religion and global awareness may cause new sects and religions to emerge with distributed structures and few differences of belief among the members.

The three decades comprising the turn of the 21st century have shown complex change and innovation. Aspects of society, technology, education, religion, and work are all interconnected, with changes in one aspect causing changes in all of them. The 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s have shown increasing contextualization, and my forecast into future decades shows this trend continuing.

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